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# THE STAKE OF PROTESTANTISM IN THE CHRISTIAN UNION MOVEMENT

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GEORGE CROSS

Rochester Theological Seminary, Rochester, N.Y.

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The religious divisions in Protestantism are an expression of its inherent spirit of spontaneity and creative freedom. The movement toward Christian Union in Protestantism is due to the free sentiment of Protestant bodies rather than to the promulgation of an ecclesiastical program. Its chief expression is in practical co-operation in missionary enterprise rather than in uniformity of doctrine or ritual. It goes hand in hand with the increasing laicizing of Protestantism. It is compatible with the historical as contrasted with the dogmatic conception of the authority of the Bible and creeds.

This characteristic Protestant movement is now confronted with the movement for the reunion of Christendom, which seeks the bond of unity in a universal acceptance of certain prescribed creeds and rituals. Canon Headlam's recent book on *Christian Reunion* when critically examined really proposes the authority of a church which shall command obedience and shall exclude from fellowship all who do not submit to the ecclesiastical program. This ideal and that of Protestantism are so contradictory that one or the other must give way. "Protestantism is not repentant of its departure from Catholicism." It has a mission for the future which it cannot abandon.

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The idea of Christian unity is in the air. With some people it is a matter of inner spirit, with others it is a matter of ecclesiastical organization and with still others it is a matter of both spirit and organization. Again, with those whose hearts are set on the dominance of a form of organization dating from the past the ecclesiastical problem lies in the task of *reunion*. But with those whose hearts are set on an order of things yet to be established the practical issue lies in the task of *union*—not of reunion. To the latter pertain almost entirely the members of the bodies calling themselves Protestants.

Protestant Christians are trying to come together, and they are meeting with some success. Of several of the larger bodies it is true that they are actually coming together. For about four hundred years Protestant Christianity has been divided into sections, some of the divisions dating from the days of the Reformation but most of them arising within the last

hundred and fifty years. The new bodies have appeared principally among English-speaking Christians through successive revolts against the formalism, oppression, and spiritual dearth of the state churches and through a new emphasis appearing among bodies having no state connection. It is noteworthy that the recent multiplication of Protestant denominations has occurred contemporaneously with the spread of Protestant Christianity as a living force of personal conviction among the masses of the people in the home lands and with the extension of their faith into many foreign lands. It is also noteworthy that the non-state churches have led in this foreign missionary enterprise. And naturally so, since the extension of a state church into foreign lands is interpretable as an act of political aggression.

The multiplication of sects or denominations of Protestants, whatever faults or errors may have occasioned them and whatever peculiarities or extravagances may have been exhibited in their character and structure, is a mark of the spontaneity, freedom, and aggressiveness of the Protestant type of Christianity. People have not been content to move along in fixed grooves—even “holy” grooves are felt to be artificial restrictions upon the spiritual life—but they persistently turn to those practices, forms of teaching and associations that best suit their general way of looking at things, whatever may have been done in the past and whatever other people would fain direct them to do now. Without doubt, there is much good in all this. Better a multitude of divisions among live Christians than the loss of enterprise and the stagnation and death that so often come with uniformity.

But a change has been coming in the relation of various Protestant bodies to one another. The older and the larger denominations are co-operating increasingly. Peace, good will and harmony as between Baptists, Congregationalists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and some of the more liberal sections of Episcopalians and Lutherans, have come to reign instead of

the old controversies and acrimonies. Old lines of cleavage are being obliterated. If new lines of cleavage are appearing they are cutting across the denominational lines. The hearts of the people in the different bodies are set upon one another as never before. These unions of heart are certain to be followed by denominational unions.

If we are duly to appreciate this movement there are some facts to be carefully noted. In the first place, it has not come about of set purpose or by the prevision, calculation, or regular guidance on the part of the ecclesiastical leaders, but it has come by the attraction of spiritual affinity and the pursuit of spiritual aims in common on the part of the multitudes of earnest, whole-souled, and active members of the churches. Some denominational interests to which they formerly gave themselves have been superseded by interests which they feel to be higher, with the result that the former seem an obstacle to the achievement of the latter. Thus the traditional divisions are becoming unnatural. The people are discarding them increasingly in their social relations and their moral and religious enterprises, and when the people do this the "leaders" must follow. When this occurs a danger-point in the movement is reached. But more of this later.

In the second place, the origin of a type of spirituality common to multitudes in the different denominations has been accompanied by the recognition of the greatness of the task that falls to them in common. The definite commitment to the task of evangelizing the whole world of men and, with it, the growing recognition of the imperativeness of thoroughly permeating the whole of the organized activities, as well as the unorganized activities of men, with the spirit of the gospel have aroused an uneasiness of conscience at the spectacle of the confusion and waste through the overlapping of effort in territories occupied by them. This results in an undesirable and unnecessary limitation of effort in territories where the need is greater. Thus the control of the activities of individ-

uals by their respective denominational organizations interferes with the pursuit of the higher ideals now before them—ideals that received no clear recognition or emphasis in the older creeds, liturgies, and orders. The people are not crying for greater official control but for the relaxing of it because it impedes their progress. Whatever organizations arise in obedience to the new movement must not be imposed upon it by authority or from without but must arise from within and be naturally organic to the higher aims that have come to the birth in the people's minds.

In the third place, associated with the foregoing there has been going on before our eyes what we may call the swiftly growing laicizing of Protestantism. Protestantism is by its inmost character a layman's faith and has no place for priests. The growing sense of immediate personal responsibility and personal fellowship Godward has brought about, especially in recent years, a multiplication of organizations and agencies in the churches that were not created by the formal action of the regular ministry and have never been under their control. They are mainly officered by laymen, non-professional leaders, and men of the formally recognized ministry mingle freely with them in their activities and as equals. These new organizations have spread through all the great Protestant bodies and in some cases represent the major part of churchly activities. Ordination cuts no figure there. It would bring no increment of power and it would give to no one who might have received it a recognizable advantage in this wider spiritual ministry. "Ordination" is now a mode of recognizing one's personal fitness for spiritual leadership and in no sense a means of conferring upon its subjects peculiar gifts.

In the fourth place, thoroughly in keeping with the aforementioned movements, is that mighty current of influence proceeding from the modern literary, historical, and philosophical reinterpretation of the Christian faith. Much alarm has been aroused in some quarters because these studies have

brought into question the adequacy and correctness of those interpretations of the Christian faith which have been formally sanctioned by the official action of the heads of great ecclesiastical systems in the past. It is to be carefully noted that this newer attitude coincides in time and place with the rapid and wide extension of learning among the multitudes and the adoption of modern methods of education. As a consequence, the Christian Scriptures, the ecclesiastical traditions, the regular forms of ritual, and the accepted doctrines of the faith have been subjected to the test of the methods of inquiry which are followed in so-called secular learning or science. To some people it has seemed a process of putting the sacred and the profane on a common level and a dereligionizing of our humanity. But it is the reverse. That which may seem, from one point of view, a secularizing of the holy appears, from another point of view, as the sanctification of the common—and, therewith, the purification of the common. This great movement, conducted mainly through the leadership of the schools, is a part of the same democratizing of authority already referred to. Faith, wherever it may appear, whether in the Scriptures or anywhere else, is allowed to make its appeal directly to the human consciousness, the mental, moral, and religious judgment. The "authority" of priests, creeds, councils, and churches departs, like Kipling's "captains and kings," and every man is urged to make a direct approach to the truth, to find help wherever he may, and to make his decisions on his own responsibility. The men of today are far better equipped than their ancestors to discover the genius and the worth of the Christian faith.

It will be seen, I think, that the concurrent movements I have roughly sketched exhibit, in the final analysis, a single unitary character. Their combined force is having an impact upon the spiritual life of our time far beyond anything in the past. This it is, and not a regretful longing to return to conditions that were outlived long ago, that has called forth the

effort to bring forth a greater degree of unity in the activities of Protestant Christians at the present time.

That we have now reached the danger-point referred to earlier in this article is evident from the number of books appearing from the pens of representatives of various church systems in the attempt to make their particular system normative. One of these,<sup>1</sup> the Bampton Lectures for the year 1920, by Professor Arthur C. Headlam, of Oxford University, proceeds from the standpoint of a theologian of the Church of England. These lectures constitute an essay in ecclesiastical politics. By a historical review of the doctrine and order of "the church" from apostolic times to the present, the lecturer—who seems to address himself particularly to the people of his own church—seeks to lay down a basis of union that will be adequate to the convictions and needs of the different divisions of a disunited Catholicism. He thinks also that it might be accepted by the old eastern churches, the churches of Scandinavia, the Reformed churches of the continent, and the Presbyterians, Methodists, and Congregationalists throughout the world. The premises of the historical argument are to be found in the proposals of the closing lecture, entitled, "Reunion."

The lecturer looks backward rather than forward. His ideals and standards are in the past rather than in the future. The church of the Nicene fathers is his model. Their discarded authority is to be reinstated, the Nicene creedal, ecclesiastical, and sacramental forms are to be re-established, the successive schisms and separations are to be annulled, and, instead of union on a new basis, there is to be reunion. We are to begin over again at the point where we left the "undivided church," acknowledge the formation of modern and ancient denominations of Christians to have been a mistake, and again make the boundaries of Christianity and churchianity coter-

<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Headlam, *The Doctrine of the Church and Christian Reunion, Being the Bampton Lectures for the Year 1920*. New York: Longmans, pp. x+326.

minous. It scarcely needs to be said that the Roman Catholic church would reject<sup>1</sup> these proposals forthwith. It rightly holds that the claims made for the Nicene Council are equally valid for the Council of Trent and the Vatican Council of 1870, that the logical place for the Anglican Episcopacy that calls itself "Catholic" is in the Roman church and that the only logical alternative is a radical Protestantism. The situation ought to be equally plain to the churches that stand on the basis of an immediate personal faith in God revealed in Christ.

The lecturer's argument rests on a fiction. It is the fiction of an actually existent undivided church, that is, using the term *church* in the sense of an organization with definitely recognized officers, rites, and doctrines. From the days of the Apostles down to the present the Christian faith has lived in and through the formation of many and various communities of Christians more or less in disagreement and more or less complementary to one another. It is likely to be so in the future. The Nicene bishops made good their claim to unity and universality by pronouncing all who dissented from their stand to be outside the church and unChristian. Canon Headlam has nothing better to offer in the end. One will search his book in vain for an admission that the unbaptized are Christian, that baptism is not a sacrament of the church or that salvation is found outside the visible church.

When it comes to the matter of concrete proposals they are summarized in three divisions,<sup>2</sup> namely, "unity of doctrine, unity of organization, unity of sacraments." These, he says, characterize the true church everywhere.

As respects the first: While it is affirmed that "the Holy Scriptures and the Creed are the doctrinal basis of Christian unity," we find that the church makes the canon by virtue of

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., J. W. Poynter, *Contemporary Review*, December, 1921; Lester J. Walker, S.J., *The Problem of Reunion*.

<sup>2</sup> Headlam, *op. cit.*, pp. 228 ff.



the authority resident in her, that she writes the creed which alone has "undoubted ecumenical authority,"<sup>1</sup> and that it is the Scriptures only as interpreted in the creed that become our guide into the truth. So also says, of course, the Roman Catholic—only he carries the claim to its logical, present-day conclusion. Plainly, Headlam's unity of doctrine depends on the unity of organization and his concern is really with the church rather than with the doctrine.

As respects the second: While the lecturer recedes from the claims of an unbroken apostolic succession<sup>2</sup> in the sense of an order of officials proceeding without a break in their ordination of one another from apostles who transmitted to them by tactful succession the gifts of the Spirit, he holds to the necessity of an unbroken church order<sup>3</sup> from the original church to the present. A few quotations are here given. The position of Cyprian is supported:

That the work of the Church is the work of God; that He, in answer to the prayers of the Church, gives his Spirit. Ordination was sacramental . . . that the essential of ordination always has been prayer with the laying on of hands. God answers the prayers of His Church. The Church orders the proper method of approaching Him.

Christ . . . created the church as a visible society. He instituted ministry and sacraments. He gave authority for legislation and discipline. . . . Catholicism is a development, but a development of Gospel elements. The church was potentially Catholic from the beginning; it has not yet attained a full or complete Catholicity.

Whether we look at the process of development or the source of its spiritual ministrations, it is the Church which is supreme. A baptism is valid because it is the baptism of the Church, whether administered within or outside; the authority of a bishop comes to him because it is conferred by the Church and even if he cease to be within the Church he can still perform Episcopal functions because he does not lose what the Church has given him. It is to the Catholic Church that the Spirit has been given, and therefore within the Church alone are all the gifts and blessings, sacramental and other, that the Spirit gives.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Lecture VII.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 264 ff.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 133 ff.

As to the third of the essentials: The sacraments obtain after all the chief emphasis. The ultimate question is always the question of salvation. With Headlam, as with all Catholics, salvation is, in the final analysis, sacramental. The church is sacramentally constituted.<sup>1</sup> "It consists of the whole body of the faithful baptized." "The Church consists of all baptized Christians." "All baptized Christians are members of Christ's Holy Catholic Church." What about the Quakers, the hosts of other unbaptized believers, and unbaptized infants? As to the sacraments of the Nonconformists: "They have valid sacraments because they obey Christ's command and intend to do what Christ bade them."<sup>2</sup> The "intention" is the significant and determinative factor in all the sacraments, according to the Catholic view. But who can possibly guarantee the intention of any administrator in the performance of any sacrament? Nobody, in any case. The whole superstructure of Dr. Headlam and of Catholicism rests on this insecure basis. They can give no assurance of salvation to a single soul. Their case becomes all the more evidently deplorable when we find the lecturer finally turning away from definitions of the meaning of the creed which he advocates and centering his interest on the obedient performance of the sacraments.

Professor Headlam has rendered the great service of making it quite clear that the cleavage between the Catholicism which he and others who regard themselves as moderates represent, on the one side, and the free spiritual movement which was sketched in the beginning of this article, on the other, is so vast and deep that one side or the other must give way.

Protestantism is not repentant of its departure from Catholicism. The story of its career is not the recital of a growing mental darkness, or moral confusion, or religious doubt, but of an expanding, ever-deepening intellectual, moral, religious—in a word—human life. Protestantism is becoming less and less inclined to retraverse or renew the course of the old contro-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 224 ff.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265; cf. p. 258.

versies by which it sought in its early days to justify the separation, because it is no longer on the defensive but has become a confidently aggressive enterprise with a world-conquering will. It is also becoming less and less minded to recall the ancient disputes between the different Protestant denominations because these disputes grew mainly out of their various retentions of specifically Catholic views. *These old controversies are being forgotten in obedience to the vision of an enlarging task.*

The Protestant conception of the meaning and worth of our common human life far outstretches the Catholic conception of that life. It has no derogatory estimate of the physical and spiritual universe in which we live and offers no apology for our being denizens of it. Its heroes are not the recluses who flee the world to escape its taint but the men of affairs who plunge into the world to bring to fulfilment in it the Kingdom of God. Its saints are not the begowned and beaded ascetics who bear on their exterior and in their minds the marks of an exclusive "holiness," but its ideal life is that lived by the housewife and mother, by the husband and father whose hands are hard because of the daily struggle to make material reality a servant to human good, by the economist, the statesman and the teacher, whose minds endure the constant strain of "worldly" care—by all, indeed, who seek by means of the common duties of the common earthly life to fulfil the purpose of that life divine which is revealed in Christ Jesus.

Accordingly, the means of salvation for mankind are not found in a legal system of doctrines to be accepted by the obeisance of intellect to authority, or in a system of ecclesiastical institutions or orders supposedly containing in themselves the sole deposit of divine grace, or in a system of rites to be observed; but they are to be found in all the natural contacts of men with one another. These are the channels along which the sanctifying divine Spirit moves from heart to heart and which bring men into a saving communion with one another

and with God. After giving all due credit to the famous preachers and teachers who have stood in the forefront of the public gaze in the progress of the Christian gospel, the chief evangelists have ever been its non-professional saints who have carried it along the highways of human travel and commerce; who have established its power in the home, the social circle, and the state; who in the infinitely varied play of human affection and thought and will have seasoned all with the spirit of the gentleness, and purity, and goodness, and vicarious love of Jesus Christ. If there are to be sacraments of any kind, these are the divinely ordained means of grace ministered by all the members of that true church whose names are written in the book of life.

The Christian churches of the future must be increasingly of the Protestant type. If they formulate their doctrines—as assuredly they will—these will be temporary records of their ever-growing interpretation of the faith which comes by the experience which men have of its power and by the new insight into its meaning which is furthered by the advance of science and philosophy. If they form ecclesiastical institutions, these will not be fixed by the dictates of formal legislation but they will be the modes of fellowship in faith and activity which are found to be most fruitful in promoting the faith. And if they observe the practice of regular and orderly public worship, be their liturgies simple or elaborate, they will do so knowing that these are only partially suited to express and to further the inward faith that is in them all and must be subject to alteration or disuse in accordance with the demands of a purer faith and a growing life.